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## Global China's human touch? The internationalisation of Chinese NGOs

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## **Chapter 6      The Shadow of the State: Depoliticisation and Diplomatiation**

NGOs are not only potential agents of change on the ground, but also generators and carriers of norms, ideology, and cultural knowledge about global development (e.g. Dogra, 2012). The previous chapter has examined the autonomy of Chinese NGOs through explicit state's influence and the non-discursive behavior of NGOs, while this chapter is going to study the discourses of Chinese NGO, through which the ideological underpinnings of Chinese NGO internationalisation can be found. In other words, Chapter 5 is an examination of how Chinese NGOs act while this chapter is about what and how they "think". Through the analysis of NGOs' organizational discourses, I try to understand how Chinese NGOs view their internationalisation and explore their motivations behind their internationalisation which can hardly be detected by their explicit behaviours and interviews. I will also make analysis over the social contexts that influence the construction of their discourse. Particularly, I will demonstrate how the developmental imaginary and rationales of the Chinese state have an important impact on Chinese NGOs' discourses, while other international imaginaries are to a large extent absent from the discourse of Chinese NGOs overseas. The study shows that the Chinese state exerts its influence over the Chinese NGOs not only explicitly, as shown in the previous chapter, but also implicitly through shaping the sources of legitimacy and value for internationalisation.

Discourse is an inseparable part of social events and dialectically tied to other aspects of social events and doing research using some forms of discourse analysis can be effective way to understand social phenomenon (Fairclough, 2003). Particularly, discourses are influenced by the power of social structure and social practices (Fairclough, 2003). The influence coming from social structures and contexts over an organization can be studied through careful examination of organizational discourses. I will rely on two discursive analytical tools, one is qualitative content analysis and one is the discursive legitimation framework developed by Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), to decipher the implicit meanings behind the Chinese NGOs' representation of their international development projects. The study finds that Chinese NGOs have shown depoliticised discourses and diplomatic discourses, either explicitly or implicitly, in their representation of their internationalisation. These discourses help Chinese NGOs achieve legitimation through four discursive legitimation strategies: avoidance, authority, rationalization and moralization. The underpinnings of these legitimation strategies have been largely influenced by the Chinese state. Thus, it shows that even though in most cases that the Chinese state does not influence directly over Chinese NGOs' international projects through material support (as illustrated in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5), its influence can still be exerted through being sources of legitimacy and value for Chinese NGOs.

This chapter begins with an introduction of studying NGOs' role by using discourse analysis, followed by an inductive analytical framework which contains two layers of discourse analysis, one layer adopting the qualitative content analysis to show what patterns or characteristics in the discourses of Chinese NGOs regarding their international development projects are, the other layer going one step further to examine how these discursive characteristics help Chinese NGOs achieve legitimacy based on Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999)'s discursive legitimation

framework. Both layers of analysis are to examine the underpinnings of Chinese NGOs' discursive practices. It then shows the main findings from the two-layer discourse analysis that Chinese NGOs have shown traits of depoliticisation and diplomatisation in their discourses and these traits help Chinese NGOs to achieve legitimacy through four discursive legitimisation strategies. Last, the article discusses and concludes how the Chinese state influences Chinese NGOs' behavior without explicit intervention but through influencing the sources of legitimacy and value for Chinese NGOs in their internationalisation.

## **6.1 Studying the Role of NGOs through Discourses and Representation**

The study of the discourses and representation of NGOs is an important means of examining their role in international development, given that discourses could identify “appropriate and legitimate ways of practicing development as well as speaking and thinking about it” (Grillo and Stirrat, 1997, p12). One major group of such research centres on examining NGOs' representation of the Global South, which is done primarily through lens of post-colonialism. Authors like Escobar argue that development discourses “has created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World” (Escobar, 1995, p9). The post-colonial lens has extended to the analysis of Northern NGOs. These NGOs are often criticized for their uncritical and decontextualized representations of the Global South. These representations ignore the diversity and complexity of the Global South and use Northern standards to define and measure “development”, reinforcing the understanding of the South through performances of poverty and victimization (Keenaghan and Reilly, 2017). They fail to critically unpack root causes of poverty and underdevelopment, which have their root in a colonial legacy of Northern hegemony. As analyzed by Dogra (2012) through 88 INGOs based in UK, INGOs remain complicit with colonial way of seeing in their messages by depoliticizing and dehistoricising lives in the South and portraying non-westerners as backward and westerners as advanced, reproducing the colonial perception of the South.

The second major group of research studying NGOs' discourses scatters around NGOs' development practices, such as NGOs' relationship with local partners, relationship with donors, and advocacy strategy. In other words, the first group of research studying NGOs' representation of the Global South represents a distinctive area of research in the study of NGO discourses, while the second group can be considered as studies other than this distinctive group that covers a variety of studies on NGO practices through the analysis of NGO discourses. The media of discourse and representation under study also covers a wide variety, including NGO annual reports, funding application forms, and interviews of NGO leaders. Some examples of this group of study include that, Schöneberg (2017) shows a narrative of trickle-down pressures with NGOs having to position themselves as intermediaries in the development system through a discourse analysis of the interactions of INGOs and Haitian local organisations. Duval and Gendron (2020) show how an INGO engages in an alternative discourse through dynamic adaptation and creates participatory discourses despite the increased dominance of neoliberal ideas. Duval et al. (2015) show how funders exert a framing influence on NGOs through an arrangement of the information required by the Canadian International Development Agency in grant applications and limit NGOs' role as performers that deliver aid technically and narrowly. These studies show that the study of NGO discourses has the analytical power to address major debates related to NGOs and development. This research falls under the second

group, focusing on NGOs' discourses and representation of their own behavior instead of how they represent the Global South.

## **6.2 Analysing the Discourses of Chinese NGOs: Two-level Analytical Framework**

This study adopts a two-layer analysis over the discourses of Chinese NGOs. The first layer answers what patterns or characteristics are shown in the discourses of Chinese NGOs regarding their international development projects, particularly, if there is any sign of state's influence. The second question goes one layer further to examine how these discursive characteristics help Chinese NGOs achieve legitimacy. Both layers of analysis are to examine the underpinning of Chinese NGOs' discursive practices. I have adopted qualitative content analysis (QCA) as the method to approach the first layer "what" question and the discursive legitimation framework created by Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) to approach the second layer "how" question.

The first layer of analysis is aimed at finding out the characteristics of the discourses of Chinese NGOs from numerous public documents of Chinese NGOs. QCA, "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, p1278), is adopted in the study. QCA can condense large amount of data and identify core consistencies and meanings that are generated from a volume of qualitative materials (Patton, 2002, p453). QCA can be applied to a wide range of materials such as interview transcripts, websites, advertisements, news articles and it can be applied to both verbal and visual materials (Schreier, 2012).

The discourses under study of QCA are organizational discourses published in the public documents of Chinese NGOs. Organisational discourse is "structured collections of texts embodied in the practices of talking and writing that bring organisationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated and consumed" (Grant et al., 2004, p3). In this study, organisational discourses are collected through two channels. One is from public statements published on official websites, via the major Chinese social media - WeChat public accounts, and in official documents (e.g. annual reports) from 16 major Chinese NGOs that are active in internationalisation; the other channel is from all international fundraising advertisements of Tencent Charity, a major Chinese public fundraising website for international projects. In total, there are 660 documents (each press release, article in WeChat or annual report is considered a single document), including 91 English-language documents (some are mere translations of the Chinese version) from the 2015–2021 from 45 Chinese NGOs (most of them are only studied through the second channel, the fundraising advertisements). This represents nearly one third of Chinese NGOs with international projects, based on the NGO Internationalisation Database. The 16 Chinese NGOs studied in depth represent a large variety of Chinese NGOs with international development projects (see the list of the 16 NGOs in Table 5 in Chapter 2). They include 4 GONGOs and 12 independent NGOs; one humanitarian-only NGO, one NGO solely engaging in COVID donations and 14 NGOs with development activities.

The unit of analysis of QCA is each NGO instead of each publication of NGO. A variety of publications from Chinese NGOs are used and they cannot be directly comparable with each other. For example, it's hard to directly compare an annual report from NGO A to a press release of NGO B. Therefore, the first step of the analysis is to streamline data and make each unit of analysis comparable. Based on the content of Chinese NGOs' public statements and

documents, I have categorized all texts and images from each document into one of four topic groups: purpose (Why do Chinese NGOs do international projects?), issues (What are the issues that concern them? What is the background of these issues?), action (What do they do and how do they accomplish it?), and outcomes (What do they aim to achieve?). These four topic groups are basic elements of an NGO's project and can be widely applicable to the contents from different documents and across diverse range of NGOs. This process streamlines and describes the large amount of data, providing an analytical foundation for pattern tracing across discourses first in each of the group and then across the four groups. Table 16 shows an example of how I put different texts from different publications from Amity Foundation into the four topic groups.

After this process, I start to identify and code meaning units, which are the smallest units that contain constellation of words, sentences or paragraphs containing aspects related to each other and helping to answer the research questions (Catanzaro, 1988). I then condense these meaning units for simplicity. I categorize the condensed meaning units into categories and different themes according to the standards of Graneheim and Lundman (2004), which states that QCA can be applied to both manifest and latent contents and the terms "category" and "theme" should be used to denote manifest and latent contents respectively with "theme" showing a deeper level of interpretation and higher level of abstraction than "category". I have generated three exclusive categories from the meaning units, soft charity discourses, explicit diplomatic discourses and implicit diplomatic discourses and further generate two themes from the three categories, which are depoliticisation and diplomatisation. Figure 5 shows an example of how some of the texts from Amity Foundation shown in Table 16 were analysed. The same process applies to all other NGOs and to images if they are shown in the documents.

**Table 16: Examples of Categorizing Texts into Four Topic Groups**

<b>Four Topic Groups</b>	<b>Examples of Categorization of Texts</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	<p>Therefore, the Amity Foundation immediately launched the Amity Ethiopia "Huo Shui Xing" disaster relief operation, aiming to effectively alleviate the local disaster situation, avoid the health related crisis that may be caused by it, and further enhance the friendly cooperation and friendship between the people of China and Egypt. More importantly, this action also shows that Amity, being a member of Chinese social organizations, actively responds to the Chinese government's "One Belt One Road" development strategy, accumulates experience for Chinese social organizations to “go out” through actions, and tries to realize the goal of achieving the charity objectives and building people-to-people bonds in "One Belt One Road".</p> <p>--From press release “The Amity Foundation went to Ethiopia to carry out the "Living Water Walk" disaster relief operation” (“爱德基金会赴埃塞俄比亚进行“活水行”赈灾行动”)</p> <p>In order to promote the friendly exchanges and resource sharing between Chinese and African people, promote the development of African society, and improve the service quality of Amity to African customers, on July 1, 2015, Amity Africa Office and Amity Printing Africa Customer Service Center opened in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, officially.</p> <p>--From press release “Amity landed in Africa and started the process of internationalisation” (“爱德落地非洲，开启国际化进程”)</p>
<b>Issue</b>	<p>“Days of torrential rain have caused the worst flooding in 14 years in central and southern Sri Lanka. Floods and landslides have killed more than 200 people and left 96 missing.”</p> <p>--From press release “Level I Response! Amity International Rescue Medical Team went to Sri Lanka to carry out flood relief” (“I 级响应！爱德国际救援医疗队赴斯里兰卡开展洪灾救援”)</p> <p>Africa is suffering from severe drought: In 2016, the drought caused by the El Niño phenomenon swept across the entire sub-Saharan African region. The rainy season in this area was seriously insufficient, which led to serious water and food security crises.</p> <p>--From press release “Please support Africa's Ethiopian drought emergency relief efforts” (“请支持非洲埃塞俄比亚旱灾紧急救援工作”)</p>
<b>Action</b>	<p>In order to gain a deeper understanding of the disaster situation and urgent needs of the victims from the mountains, the Amity Foundation rescue team selected two people to form two research teams working with the Nepal Office of the International Disaster</p>

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Relief Alliance, facing the risks of aftershocks and secondary disasters that may occur at any time. They went to Gorkha District, the epicentre of Kathmandu, and Sindhupalchok, the hardest-hit area, the day before yesterday and yesterday respectively, to conduct research work on the local demands.

--from press release "Amity and "Ni" being together—the 6th Issue of Rescue Brief" "爱德和“尼”在一起救灾简讯第六期”

On the afternoon of July 7th, Amity disaster relief working group composed of 4 people, He Wen, Deputy Secretary-General of Amity Foundation, Zheng Wei, Director of Amity Africa Office, Zhang Zhengdong, Permanent Representative of Amity Africa Office, and Wei Wei, Project Director of Amity Africa Office, set off from the Nanjing headquarters of the Amity Foundation to Ethiopia for conducting water disaster relief activities.”

--from press release "The Amity Foundation went to Ethiopia to carry out the "Living Water Walk" disaster relief operation" "爱德基金会赴埃塞俄比亚进行“活水行”赈灾行动”

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**Outcome**

On the one-year anniversary of the earthquake in Nepal, we are back again in Nepal, to the communities we have rebuilt. All three communities have established multiple women's development groups, the largest group has 72 members and the smallest also has 32 members.

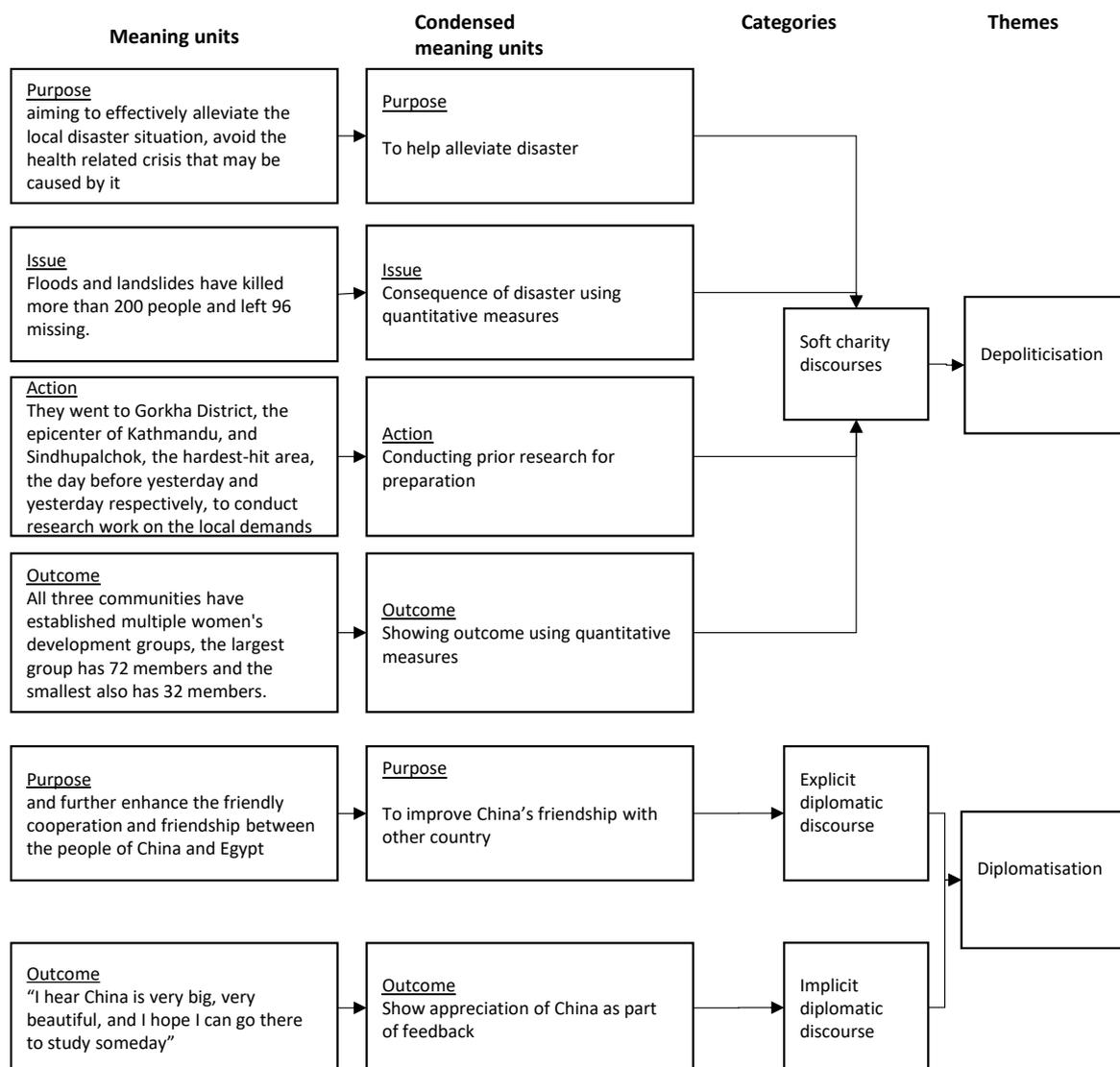
--from press release "Support across borders, full disclosure on the first anniversary of the Nepal earthquake" "跨越国界的支援尼泊尔地震一周年全披露”

Sumina Shrestha told Amity staff about her dream while laughing "I hear China is very big, very beautiful, and I hope I can go there to study someday" (Amity Foundation, 2015)

--from press release "Amity and "Ni" being together—the 4th Issue of Rescue Brief" "爱德和“尼”在一起救灾简讯第四期”

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**Figure 5: Example of Process of Qualitative Content Analysis**



Through an inductive process of QCA, I have identified the two themes (major characteristics) of Chinese NGOs' discourses in relation to the Chinese development cooperation as depoliticisation and diplomatisation. Here depoliticisation refers to actions that avoid discussing political causes and providing political solutions to the problem in international development. Chinese NGOs usually focus on the symptoms of underdevelopment instead of giving a critical reflection, e.g. avoiding addressing political issues such as inequality and social justice. Moreover, Chinese NGOs "diplomatised" their roles in international projects, presenting themselves as friendship ambassadors for China. The tendency of depoliticisation and diplomatisation is evident in all four topic groups (see a summary in Table 17). In the following two sections, I will illustrate how discourses under each topic group are characterised by depoliticisation and diplomatisation respectively. Only translated English texts (Texts 1-24) will be shown in the main contexts of this chapter, while the original Chinese texts are attached in Appendix 1.

**Table 17: Four-Group Analytical Framework of Discourse Analysis and Examples Shown by Chinese NGOs under Each Group**

<b>Theme/ Characteristics</b>	<b>The Purpose</b>	<b>The Issue</b>	<b>The Action</b>	<b>The Outcome</b>
<b>De-politicisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Positive connotation: "to make something better" (Lack of attention on (in)equality or (in)justice)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Constructing problems as a series of "lacks" (Lack of deep reflection on causes)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Images of official support (Avoiding negative attitudes towards all stakeholders )</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Outcomes based on quantifiable and immediate results (lack of results addressing systematic problems)</li> </ul>
<b>Diplomatisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Using explicit diplomatic discourses that are often used by the Chinese state, such as "BRI", "promote China's image"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introducing Chinese state action in the background</li> <li>● When explaining why the issue matters - China's responsibility to help</li> <li>● When describing the recipient country - China being the neighbour of the recipient country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Goods with Chinese cultural symbols</li> <li>● Displaying the Chinese flag onsite</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Showing appreciation to China/the Chinese people</li> </ul>

In the second-layer analysis, I go further from showing what discursive characteristics are shown from Chinese NGOs to explaining how these characteristics help Chinese NGOs legitimise themselves in internationalisation by relying on the discursive legitimisation framework of Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999). According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy is "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions". Suchman (1995) also acknowledges that legitimisation is a process that rests heavily on communication and involves both actions and discourses. To survive and sustain themselves, NGOs must communicate in a particular way that is perceived appropriate to a social and political system. The analysis of how NGOs legitimize themselves through discourses could provide insights into how social structure and social contexts, which are "the totality of conditions under which discourse is being produced, circulated and interpreted" (Blommaert,

2005, p251), make an impact on Chinese NGOs' behaviour, particularly, how the Chinese state as an important part of the social contexts influence the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs.

I rely on the discursive legitimation framework of Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), which links discourses to social contexts through legitimacy, to examine how Chinese NGOs legitimise themselves through discourses. Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) identified four major categories of discursive legitimation strategies – authorisation (legitimation by reference to the authority), rationalisation (legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity), moralisation (legitimation by reference to value systems), and mythopoesis (legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions). This analytical framework has been widely applied and adapted to analyse different discursive practices (e.g. Fairclough, 2003; Joutsenvirta, 2013; Mackay, 2015; Reyes, 2011; Vaara et al., 2006; Vaara, 2014) and the elements of the framework can be used either separately or in combination. In this study, I have particularly identified authority, rationalisation and moralisation from the framework as three discursive legitimation strategies for Chinese NGOs to gain legitimacy. However, Van Leeuwen and Wodak's framework has only looked at what discourses have been constructed. I will extend their framework by adding another discursive strategy, “avoidance”, to take into account the discourses that have not been created. Avoided discourses can also contribute to gaining legitimacy through avoiding de-legitimacy. In sum, I have identified avoidance, authority, rationalisation, and moralisation as four ways that Chinese NGOs have made to achieve legitimacy and avoid de-legitimacy.

### **6.3 Depoliticisation of Development through Soft Charity Discourses**

The discussion of depoliticisation in development has been brought up to attention since the influential analysis done by Ferguson on the Thaba-Tseka Development Project in Lesotho (Ferguson, 1994). Ferguson argues that the “development” apparatus in Lesotho, becoming an “anti-politics machine”, depoliticises the problems of poverty and deprivation and acts only as a practical and technical tool for the solutions, while in the end, almost unnoticed, it expands the bureaucratic state power. Ever since, depoliticisation has been discussed extensively in different contexts. For example, Harriss (2002) argues that the idea of “social capital”, prevalent in World Bank, is an additional weapon in the armory of the “anti-politics machine” that is mystified to depoliticise the problems of poverty and social justice. Chhotray (2007) illustrates the complexity behind governmental attempts to depoliticise India's national watershed development programme. Hunsmann (2016)'s study on international AIDS control in Tanzania illustrates how political causes of the conflict in global health practices are neglected.

NGOs have also been criticized as new attachments to the “anti-politics machine” (e.g. Harriss, 2002). NGOs are instrumentalized by development bureaucracies to solve problems that should be addressed through political solutions. Their political roles, loaded with potentials to challenge the status-quo and politicise issues, are coopted into the large bureaucratic “development” apparatus. The reliance of NGOs on foreign aid and government funding is a deciding cause for their depoliticising, as illustrated by Atia and Herrold (2018) through examination of the NGO sectors in both Pakistan and Morocco. They find that the dominant funding from both foreign aid and/or government to NGOs has enabled a patron-grantee relationship, resulting in increased upward accountability and the depoliticisation of NGO agendas which diluted activism and prioritized service provision.

Considering the compromised autonomy that Chinese NGOs usually have in a regulatory environment that requires them to be cautious about political issues, one may not be optimistic about Chinese NGOs on their potential to (re)politicise development. The discourse analysis confirms this hypothesis that Chinese NGOs have rarely used any discourse that address the systematic causes behind underdevelopment or touched upon political issues such as inequality and social injustice. Chinese NGOs' discourses in their representation are largely "soft charity discourses", a concept that I have derived from Andreotti (2014)'s work on global citizenship education, where she introduces the "soft understanding" of development, a view that focuses on symptoms of underdevelopment instead of a critical view that reflects upon global power relations that cause injustice, the so-called "critical understanding" of development in global citizenship education. The texts analyzed unveil that the soft charity discourses of Chinese NGOs are constituted throughout the four topic groups, purpose, issue, process, and outcome as shown in Table 17.

### *Purpose*

The purpose statements of Chinese NGOs usually have a positive connotation, the construction of which are often in the simple form of "to make something better" or "to provide something", such as "to promote students' overall development", "to promote the improvement of the production and livelihood in the areas with poverty" "to make children free of AIDS", "to provide food for the children in hunger" "to promote awareness for wildlife protection in Africa". There is no single NGO under study that has vocabularies related to (in)equality and (in)justice in their purpose statements. The statement of "to make something better" idealizes the charity work and distracts readers' attention from thinking about deeper questions on distributional injustice or inequality, which are important to make fundamental changes.

### *Issues*

When Chinese NGOs describe the issues or the background for requiring actions, they usually construct the problems based on a series of statements showing what the recipients lack and use statistics to show severity of the problems, as shown in Text 1, an excerpt of an online fundraising advertisement from China Charities and Foundation for Children describing why the NGO needs to fundraise. Text 1 uses several statistics to show that children in Nigeria lack schools and education. People in the recipient countries are described in dire situations that they lack education, electricity, water, food, medical service among others. However, there is little thought-provoking discourses of the causes to these problems. Causes are mentioned briefly in simple phrases, such as "years of economic sanctions and political turmoil" in Text 2, which has no further elaboration on what kind of economic sanctions and political turmoil and how they lead to poverty in Myanmar. One of the most frequent cited causes are natural disasters, such as the Covid pandemic and locust plague in Text 4, and conflicts and wars, as shown in Text 3, 4, 5. The advent of natural disasters is often seen as something beyond human control so no stakeholder should be responsible for it, while conflicts mentioned alone without any reflection on the causes of conflicts may mask other more profound and systematic reasons for the suffering. All the problems are illustrated as something that occurs naturally, and NGOs simply take them from where they are now. There is no reflection over any system nor criticism over any agencies that may be held accountable.

#### *Text 1:*

*Local education situation: Nigerian primary school enrollment fees are high (10,000-40,000 RMB), and school-aged children cannot go to school; There are*

300+ ethnic minorities and 200+ languages in Nigeria, and there is an urgent need to establish schools; Nigeria has 12 million children out of school, the most in the world. (China Charities and Foundation for Children n.d)

Text 2:

Due to years of **economic sanctions and political turmoil**, Myanmar's economic development has stagnated and its infrastructure, especially electricity, is seriously lacking. The national poverty rate is 37.5%, and low-income people with a per capita daily income of less than 1.25 US dollars (about 8 yuan) account for 40% of the total population, making it one of the poorest countries in Asia. (GEI, 2016)

Text 3:

Syria has been **at war for more than six years since its civil war** broke out in 2011. In what has been called the "worst humanitarian disaster in the 21st century", more than 520,000 people lost their lives, 12 million were displaced, and 6 million depended on humanitarian aid. Among them, more than 2.3 million children became refugees and struggled on the edge of death. (Suzhou Love Zone Charity Foundation, 2017)

Text 4:

China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation decided to launch the Smiling Children project providing free meals to schools in Ethiopia's Addis Ababa City. As 2020 begins, the situation becomes more severe.

1) **Covid pandemic:** The epidemic has not yet ended in Ethiopia. There are 26,070 confirmed cases. At present, about 1,000 new cases are being diagnosed every day. This already reaches the highest capacity of Ethiopia's daily testing.

2) **Locust plague:** A swarm of locusts covering one square kilometer of land can eat the equivalent of 35,000 people's food a day. Ethiopia, as the center of the locust plague, already has more than 40% of the country's population suffering from malnutrition.

3) **Violent conflicts:** 100,000 people have been displaced by conflict in northern Ethiopia and 1.1 million may be trapped in hardship.

4) **Hunger:** The World Food Programme states in the "State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021" that a total of 720 million to 811 million people in the world will face hunger in 2020. By taking the median value which is 768 million, the number of hungry people in 2020 will increase compared to 2019 by about 118 million. (CFPA, 2021a)

Text 5:

Since the late 1970s of the 20th century, the unrest in Central Asia has profoundly affected the world. Some 2.7 million Afghans have been forcibly displaced **by war, conflict and violence**. Neighboring Pakistan, which is also a developing country, tolerated and accommodated 1.4 million of them. The

*sudden influx of people exacerbates the shortage of natural resources. In (refugee) receiving communities, life can be fraught with hardship: villages are often far apart, and limited locations for water collection require residents to walk hundreds of meters every day to collect water. When the weather is hot, there is no power supply and electrical appliances to store and preserve food and medicine. People can only cook with fire, but firewood is expensive. Nonetheless, over the past four decades, Pakistan has made great efforts to resettle and protect Afghan refugees and support the maintenance of regional peace.*

*(China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation, 2021)*

### **Action**

When Chinese NGOs describe how they conduct their programs, the discourses avoid negative attitude towards all kinds of stakeholders including any kind of governments or institutions. In some cases, they explicitly show discourses and images about governmental support. As shown in Text 6, a Chinese civil rescue team Shenzhen Rescue Volunteers Federation has shown positive attitude towards the Iranian government which provided support to their disaster relief work. Another notable phenomenon is to show images with the presence of officials in the launching ceremonies, either from the Chinese side or from the host country or both, such as Figure 6 and 7. It shows that Chinese NGOs take officials' role as an integrated part of their programs, which indicates that their actions are within what officials allow. They take authority's support as a source of legitimacy, staying within the approaches allowed by governments instead of trying to be critical of government agencies' role in development.

*Text 6:*

*The Iranian national government and the local government expressed their gratitude to the civil rescue forces from various countries in the disaster area and provided the necessary conditions for carrying out rescue work... (Shenzhen Rescue Volunteers Federation, 2018)*

**Figure 6. Local Education Director in Myanmar Attends the Launching Ceremony of An Educational Development Project (Yundi, 2017a)**



**Figure 7. Chinese Officials and Ethiopian Officials Attended the Project Launch Ceremony of Water Sanitation Program in Ethiopia (Amity Foundation, 2017a)**



### ***Outcome***

Then, Chinese NGOs construct outcomes based on immediate impact. From school stationaries, food bags to solar lighting equipment, Chinese NGOs usually illustrate outcomes or expected outcomes based on tangible and often quantifiable and immediate results, as illustrated in Text 7 and Text 8, where “158 food bags”, “390 students”, “12 teachers” are all tangible, quantifiable and immediate results. These outcomes often have a linear relationship with the amount of donation. One more donation can lead to one more set of goods donated and one more person benefited. This is nothing new in fundraising, as such immediate quantifiable results tend to be more attractive to donors because they can see the results of charity more readily (Bush, 2015). However, the quantification prevents the more underlying and systematic problems being exposed, challenged and discussed.

Overall, there is lack of reflective, critical and transformative understanding on global development issues shown in the discourses and representation of Chinese NGOs. Chinese NGOs use soft charity discourses, phrasing the purpose of the projects without addressing inequality or injustice, constructing the development issues as a set of specific lacks, showing images and positive gesture towards government officials, and presenting the solutions with a quick and quantifiable goods and services. They present a simplistic view of global development, instead of making critical reflections on systematic causes of global problems and taking political attempts to address global injustice.

*Text 7:*

*The International Free Lunch Project delivered **158 food bags to 150 students and 8 teachers** at Recada Primary School in Masare, the second largest slum in Nairobi, Kenya (Lunch For Children, 2020a).*

*Text 8:*

*The project will directly benefit **390 students and 12 teachers**, and indirectly benefit residents living near the school. A school with **280 students and 10 teachers** will be directly benefited from the construction of new school buildings and the addition of classroom supplies, and a school with **110 students and 2 teachers** will be directly benefited from the distribution of learning supplies.(Amity Foundation, 2017b)*

## 6.4 Diplomatisation of International Charities

It is notable that Chinese NGO representation exceeds mere charity. Whether explicitly or implicitly, Chinese NGOs “diplomatisation” their roles by, presenting themselves as friendship ambassadors for China. Unlike many large international NGOs, which do not explicitly show the national identity of their origin, Chinese NGOs show strong national identity. Their international projects are often concerned with China’s relations with other nations, especially regarding how these actions can positively promote China’s image and foreign relations.

### *Purpose*

Some Chinese NGOs explicitly employ discourses often used in Chinese foreign affairs, such as “responding to the national Belt and Road Initiative”, “help build A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind (*renlei mingyun gongtongti/人类命运共同体*)”, “promote People-to-People Bond (*minxin xiangtong/民心相通*)” (as shown in Text 9). It is not surprising to see Chinese NGOs using the term “Belt and Road initiative”, as it has become a buzzword used in many occasions related to international issues in China. The roles of Chinese NGOs in building people-to-people bonds in BRI countries have been officially referenced in the Action Plan for People-to-People Bond in the Belt and Road Initiative for Chinese Social Organisations (2017–20), thus “People-to-People Bond” is often referred to by Chinese NGOs. “Community with Shared Future for Mankind” is another archetypal phrase in the Chinese official discourse, which was firstly introduced in the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012 and since then has been frequently cited in President Xi’s key domestic and international speeches, a manifestation of the Chinese government’s rhetoric of mutual and peaceful development and cooperation. By referring to “Community with Shared Future for Mankind”, Chinese NGOs show no hesitation to present themselves as peace-loving friendship ambassadors of the Chinese nation. The above-mentioned phrases are commonly used in combinations to emphasize their congruousness with the top official guidance.

Some Chinese NGOs may not use any official diplomatic discourses as discussed above. Instead, they simply use straightforward discourses such as “promoting China-X country friendship”. Such examples can be seen in the project objective of Yundi’s children’s project in Myanmar (as shown in Text 10) and program description of Rainbow Volunteers for their volunteering project in Nepal (as shown in Text 11). Yundi states explicitly that its educational project in the refugee camp in northern Myanmar is to contribute to the China and Myanmar relationship, while the last sentence of Rainbow Volunteer Club’s project description explicitly states that the project is not only for humanitarian reasons but also for the relationship between China and Nepal. One thing to note that Rainbow Volunteer Club is a relatively independent Chinese NGO with no governmental background and funding. Rainbow Volunteer does not state BRI or other official diplomatic terms in any of its public presentation, but still shows diplomatic intention. It shows that diplomatization is not only specific to GONGO, from which more official diplomatic phrases are used though. Discourses about promoting China’s image is another example of how Chinese NGOs show explicit diplomatic intention. As shown in Text 12, China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation (CBCGDF) shows a responsibility to reverse China’s image by participating in the issues that Chinese are often blamed for. By presenting a cause to its involvement in international wildlife

conservation being to improve China's image, the Chinese NGO shows its intention to contribute to the soft power of China.

Of the 16 NGOs in this study, 8 have adopted such language at least once in stating the purpose or meaning of their projects. Such discourses with diplomatic connotations are almost never used in isolation and are always used in addition to discourses about charity. Text 9, an excerpt from CFPA's Panda Pack project, shows that the diplomatic discourses "extend the friendship of the Chinese people" and "promote People-to-People Bond" are stated following discourses relating to the charitable or humanitarian purposes of the NGO's projects – "to improve the learning conditions of needy primary school students" – signalling that the diplomatic meaning of the development projects exceeds basic humanitarian causes and is grander and more dignified.

The diplomatisation is often explicit when it references official Chinese diplomatic or strategic discourses such as "A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind", "the BRI", and "to promote China's relationship with other countries". GONGOs tend to more likely to use explicit diplomatisation. All 4 GONGOs in the study have used explicit diplomatic discourses in their purpose statements, though such use of explicit diplomatisation is not only limited to GONGOs. On the other hand, diplomatisation can be more subtle and implicit in the other three topics, issues, action and outcomes. 14 out of the 16 NGOs under in-depth study have exhibited at least one sign of diplomatisation through implicit diplomatic discourses, including with their use of images, showing the prevalence of diplomatisation across both GONGOs and non-GONGOs. Such implicit discourses often have a strong national identity subtly connoting the promotion of China.

*Text 9:*

*The project is a specific action to **respond to the national 'Belt and Road Initiative'** and help build **A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind**. It aims to improve the learning conditions of needy primary school students in developing countries along the 'Belt and Road' route, promote the overall development of students, and **extend the friendship of the Chinese people, promote People-to-People Bond, and build the bridge of friendship**. (CFPA, 2020)*

*Text 10:*

*Overall goal: To train Burmese teachers, improve educational facilities, help children obtain education, cultivate a good community and support environment, and contribute **to the long-term friendship and peace between China and Myanmar**. (Yundi, 2017)*

*Text 11:*

*In January, Rainbow Volunteer Club's second volunteer trip to Nepal was launched. Through exchanges of volunteers, more friends have gained a deep and objective understanding of a country, expanded their own horizons and created more possibilities for the future from different perspectives such as culture, economy, society, national development and future challenges, through the role of front-line volunteering. At the same time, Chinese and Nepalese volunteers and social workers **are building friendship between the peoples of***

*the two countries while promoting the spirit of humanity. (Rainbow Volunteer Club, 2019)*

Text 12:

*Internationally, when people talk about the protection of African elephants, the Chinese are always criticized - after all, they are a major country in the ivory trade and large amount of ivory trade naturally boost the killing of elephant by poachers. But China has pledged to completely ban the processing and sale of ivory for commercial use by the end of 2017. Together with our efforts, we will work with all parties to **gradually reverse the image of the Chinese in Africa** as an international wildlife conservationist. Chinese people can also be heroes to protect African elephants! (China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation (CBCGDF), 2017)*

### **Issues**

When Chinese NGOs present the background of an issue, they often bring China or the Chinese state into the discourse. One way they do this is to mention the Chinese state's contribution to resolving the issue before introducing what the NGO itself has planned or accomplished. Text 13, an excerpt from the press release of RamUnion's disaster relief action in Mozambique, introduces the Chinese state-led national rescue team's actions at the beginning of the press release.

When introducing why the NGO is working on an issue, some NGOs mention that it's China's responsibility to help international society, as shown in Text 14, an excerpt from a fundraising advertisement from Lingshan Charity Foundation. Such statements imply that one reason for an NGO to pursue international projects is to help fulfil China's international responsibilities.

When introducing the country where their project is located, some NGOs use language that describes these countries as China's neighbours, even if they are not geographically proximate. Through the concept of "neighbourhood", Chinese NGOs elevate the discourse from an organisational to a national level, as a neighbourhood refers to a relationship between China and other countries and typically indicates a close relationship or friendship. Text 15 from the Rainbow Volunteer Club describes China and Nepal as neighbours and Text 16 from Yundi describes China and Myanmar as neighbours, which are literally the cases, while Text 17 from Lunch For Children uses "neighbourhood" to metaphorically describe the relationship between Kenya and China, two countries quite distant from each other. The sentence "*xiangzhi wu yuanjin, wanli shang wei lin/相知无远近,万里尚为邻*" (Mutual understanding disregards distance; neighbors can live even thousands of miles apart)" is derived from a traditional Chinese poem. It signifies that as long as there is sufficient mutual understanding and trust, a relationship can be as close as neighbours despite the distance.

Text 13:

*At the request of the Mozambican government, a group of 65 people with supplies **from the Chinese National Rescue Team** took a chartered plane and arrived at the area struck by the hurricane, Beira, Mozambique, on March 25. This is also the first time that the National Emergency Management Department has sent emergency humanitarian relief operations overseas in the name of the country. (RamUnion, 2019a)*

Text 14:

*In the past, we **used to be a recipient country**, having received donations and aid from the world's developed countries and various international organisations. Today, as China grows strong, **it's our time to take international responsibility for the international community**. (Lingshan Charity Foundation, 2015)*

Text 15:

*It has been hard to get to the top of the mountain where the primary school is. **When looking up, one can see China on the other side**. (Rainbow Volunteer Club, 2015)*

Text 16:

*The Yunnan-Myanmar border is 1997 kilometers long. The second special zone of Kachin State (Mai Ja Yang) of Myanmar **is connected by mountains and rivers with Longchuan County**, Yunnan Province. Both sides of the border are of Jingpo ethnic group. (Yundi, 2017b)*

Text 17:

*Mutual understanding disregards distance; **neighbors** can live even thousands of miles apart [...] Thank you to all of you who have supported the international free lunch project and sent them lunch. Because of you, we have been able to establish such a beautiful friendship with children thousands of miles away. (Lunch For Children, 2020b)*

## **Action**

Diplomatisation is commonly presented through the promotion of Chinese culture as part of the projects. Figures 8–10 demonstrate that some Chinese NGOs present Chinese culture as part of a donation: gifts imprinted with images of dragons, Peking opera, or pandas exhibit a message that exceeds the cause of charity. These gifts have a strong Chinese identity that reminds the recipients that the gifts are not merely from the organisation but also from the country of China. Besides the culture promoting messages sent from the pictures, some Chinese NGOs show straightforward intention for culture promotion through texts. As shown in Text 18, the deputy director of Amity Foundation spoke of the hope that more children in its educational program in Cambodia could learn Chinese and have more understanding of China, while as shown in Text 19, Yundi shows similar intention in its own educational program in Cambodia. To Chinese NGOs, promoting Chinese culture and donating goods are two positive things that can be combined. These organisations consider Chinese culture valuable and take it as a means of showing friendliness. Particularly, as seen in all the above examples, cultural promotion is commonly seen in projects related to children, who are generally more acceptable to new things and are seen as the future. These Chinese NGOs try to generate a positive attitude towards China among the young generations by making them interested in the Chinese culture through charity programs.

**Figure 8-9. T-shirts Donated to Nepalese Children** (Rainbow Volunteer Club, 2016)



**Figure 10. A School Bag and Stationary Set Donated to Children Overseas** (CFPA,2020)



*Text 18:*

*At the launching ceremony of the project, Ms. Yu Hongyu, Deputy Secretary-General of Amity Foundation, said that children are the future and hope of the world, and the future and development of children determine the future and development of the world. She hopes that **through reading and learning Chinese**, children can have broad vision, gaining more knowledge and imagination in this era of rapid development of information. She **also hopes that the children can learn Chinese well and understand China's splendid civilization**, magnificent rivers and mountains and enthusiastic people. (Amity Foundation, 2019)*

*Text 19:*

*The overall objective: through the introduction of modern Chinese educational concepts and methods, the conditions for teaching and cultural and sports activities in campus will be improved, **the exchange of Chinese and Cambodian cultures among the next generation in Cambodia will be promoted, and Cambodian children will be more recognized and yearned for the Chinese culture**. At the same time, a group of volunteers who are close to*

*the people and China are cultivated. The promotion of Chinese language and Chinese culture will enable Yunnan's foreign aid projects to be recognized and to have long-term and far-reaching influence in the recipient countries, and promote the bond between the people of China and Cambodia. (Yundi, 2018)*

Another route of diplomatisation is through displaying Chinese national flags when the NGOs conduct activities in a host country. Some NGOs present the national flags of China and the host country in project launching ceremony (as shown in Figure 7). Such ceremonies are often attended by officials from both countries. Sometimes Chinese NGOs show Chinese flag on site, as shown in Figure 11. Displaying the Chinese national flag sends a strong diplomatic message as if the project were endorsed by the Chinese government in order to promote the relationship between China and the host country. Though this occurs more frequently with GONGOs, some independent NGOs do show similar behaviour. Especially, when humanitarian assistance is provided, some Chinese NGOs (though not GONGOs) display the national flag onsite (see Figure 12); this runs contrary to the international practice of NGOs often deliberately not displaying national flags when overseas on humanitarian operations (Calhoun, 2017). Such displays muddle the pure humanitarian incentive with diplomatic motivations, which may lead people to mistakenly believe a project represents official Chinese aid.

**Figure 11. Staff Distributed Food Packs to Local Recipients (CFPA, n.d.a)**



**Figure 12. Humanitarian Action in Mozambique (RamUnion, 2019b)**



## **Outcomes**

To show outcomes, it is common for Chinese NGOs to use local recipient testimonies that are filled with admiration for and gratitude to China. As shown in Texts 20-22 about feedback from local communities, all three NGOs use China or Chinese related complements to show the satisfaction of the recipients. By including feedback associated with China in public presentations, Chinese NGOs emphasise their national identity over their organisational identity, as if one of the organisation's most significant achievements was bolstering China's image.

Apart from the local recipient testimonies, local cheering messages to China during the COVID-19 are commonly shown in the official publications of Chinese NGOs, as shown in Text 23-24 and Figure 13-14. These local blessing to China during the Covid outbreak have clearly shown that Chinese NGOs identify themselves more than a mere charity organization, but a bridge of friendship between China and the world.

*Text 20:*

***"I hear China is very big, very beautiful, and I hope I can go there to study someday"***(Amity Foundation, 2015)

*Text 21:*

***"Today, as a beneficiary, Nazhu received the love of the Chinese people"***  
(CFPA, 2021b)

*Text 22:*

***"With the support of China, I have the confidence to build our school better... I also want to let children know more about China and the world through the Internet. I really thank China for giving her and the students so much help"***  
(Yundi, 2018)

*Text 23:*

***The mountains and rivers are different, the wind and the moon are in the same sky. Please receive the same piece of love from the same piece of sky. After hearing about the novel coronavirus pneumonia in China, the lovely Nepalese children and Nepalese colleagues, at the Rainbow School in Kathmandu, spontaneously prayed for China and cheered for China together!*** (Rainbow Volunteer Club, 2020)

*Text 24:*

***Two days later, in the Masare community, there is loud cheering for China and Wuhan. Thousands of teachers and students from 10 elementary schools walked through the main roads of the community with posters made by themselves, blessing all the way to China and Wuhan.*** (Lunch for Children, 2020b)

**Figure 13-14 Nepalese Children Sending Prayers to China** (Rainbow Volunteer Club, 2020)



## 6.5 Discursive Legitimation Strategies

### *Avoidance*

Avoidance is a type of discursive strategies that certain discourses are absent to avoid risking legitimacy. As illustrated in the previous section, Chinese NGOs have avoided using critical discourses related to inequality and injustice and avoided challenging any governmental agencies when they describe their purposes, elucidate the issue of concerns, and illustrate their actions and outcomes. Such discursive practice avoids the risks of de-legitimation from the major stakeholders, including from the Chinese state. Though the Chinese state does not have comprehensive regulation or control specifically over the internationalisation of Chinese NGOs yet, the existing regulations governing Chinese NGOs have been enough to constrain the behaviour of Chinese NGOs. As shown in Chapter 4 and 5, to avoid a negative response from the state, Chinese NGOs avoid confrontational approaches and behave like charity service providers overseas. Their discourses also avoid sensitive topics and are uncritical about social issues, which is consistent with the refrained activities Chinese NGOs engage in overseas.

### *Authorisation*

Authorisation is legitimation by reference to authority (Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999), that is, anyone in whom institutional authority has been vested, such as a parent, official, or expert, or impersonally, regulations, laws, or policies. It means that a certain activity is legitimised because an authority approves it. Here, in Chinese NGOs' case, authority refers in particular to state authority, the connection with which could earn Chinese NGOs' legitimacy both in front of various governmental bodies and Chinese public. More specifically, I have identified three subtypes that are common in the discourse of Chinese NGOs under this authorisation: conformity, normalisation, and confirmation.

Conformity refers to Chinese NGOs' frequent use of official discourses like "BRI" and "A Community with Shared Future for Mankind". These discourses are to gain legitimacy by signalling that the international endeavours of Chinese NGOs conform to national strategies. By responding to high-level strategy and messages and addressing politically correct concepts like harmony, connectivity, and friendliness in international affairs, Chinese NGOs could gain a green light for various regulatory processes and respond to various challenges by both the authorities and the public. By stating that a major purpose of an international project is "to respond to the BRI", Chinese NGOs have gained advantages in front of potential challenges, assuming that national strategies like the BRI have unchallengeable authority, at least openly.

Normalisation is a type of legitimacy strategy that seeks to render something legitimate by exemplarity (Vaara et al., 2006), that is, that something is normal or natural because another agent has performed the action. Some Chinese NGOs illustrate what others, especially the Chinese government, have done before describing what an NGO itself is doing (see Text 13). Chinese NGOs legitimise themselves by simply exemplifying the state's action, which is deemed unquestionable and legitimate.

Confirmation is a legitimisation strategy that renders Chinese NGOs' activities legitimate through formal or informal recognition and endorsement (see Figures 6–7). This common legitimisation strategy can come in the form of government delegations, awards, or financial and/or in-kind support (Howell et al., 2020), and recognition can come from either the Chinese state or recipient country. Images like Figures 6–7 send a strong message of authority, particularly when officials appear in the image. Regardless of whether the government is involved with a project, the presence of government officials implies their support and recognition.

### ***Rationalisation***

Rationalisation is legitimisation by reference to the utility of a social practice (Vaara et al., 2006; Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999), especially, in this context, “instrumental rationalisation”, which provides rationally justifies practices based on the purpose they serve, the needs they fulfil, or the positive outcome they will have (Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999). In order to serve as a legitimisation, these purposes or effects related discursive constructions must contain an element of moralisation (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999), which usually triggers positive values based on certain moral standards valued by the target audience. The three most common types of purposes for Chinese NGOs' international projects that connote a diplomatic meaning are promoting China's relationship with other countries, promoting China's image, and promoting Chinese culture. The outcomes are usually presented through beneficiaries' messages of recognition of and appreciation for China, as shown in Text 20–22. These messages are offered as a proof of a Chinese NGO's success at promoting China's international relations and images.

The submerged value behind either the purposes or the outcomes is nationalist ideology, namely, that actions benefitting national interests are valued and justified. National interest becomes a crucial part of rationalisation as it serves as a benchmark, if not the most important benchmark, for evaluating the utility of an activity. Tang and Darr (2012) compared surveys from 35 countries and regions, and they found that China showed one of the highest levels of popular nationalism globally. Cheng and Smyth's (2016) study suggests that in China nationalistic sentiment is an important determinant of public support for international aid, which may be based on the belief that providing foreign aid improves the image of the donor and furthers nationalist interests. The nationalistic justification for international aid activities evinced in the discourses of Chinese NGOs corresponds well to popular nationalistic sentiments. Although Chinese popular nationalism is not completely determined by the Chinese state, it is the Chinese state that mainly defines how the space for popular nationalism should be opened (Pang and Thomas, 2017). The justification behind Chinese cultural promotion is associated with national interests as well. Patriotic and nationalistic values are strongly held in areas of China's culture and history (Pang and Thomas, 2017). Cultural representation overseas is encouraged by the Chinese state as the traditional Chinese culture with Confucianism as its core is being revived as a new nationalist discourse by the Chinese state (Cheung, 2012), which is evident in the global establishment of Confucius Institutes with their mission of spreading Chinese culture and language overseas.

## ***Moralisation***

The final legitimisation strategy is moralisation – legitimisation based on moral values (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Compared with rationalisation, the moral values of this strategy are explicit rather than being implicit in an initiative’s purposes and outcomes. Some common moral values in this regard are reciprocity (see Text 14) and helping one’s neighbours (see Texts 15–17). When used in an international relations context, reciprocity implies a level of moral duty for China to give back internationally, to show gratitude for the help it received during its own development. Such discourses alleviate some of the public controversy concerning aid being prioritised for foreigners when domestic demand exists. According to Ruan’s (2021) study of the relationship between aid framing and public attitudes demonstrates that framing aid as reciprocity has the largest positive effect on people compared to other frames employed by the Chinese government. Thus, Chinese NGOs could acquire strong moral legitimacy by stressing the value of reciprocity.

Concerning helping one’s neighbour, which is a virtue in many cultures including Chinese culture. Geographical proximity imposes some level of moral duty to help one’s neighbour out of troubles. The importance of the relationship with one’s neighbours is recognised at both the individual and state levels. Such value is evident in the famous passages in Chinese classics like *Zuo Zhuan*/左传, “*qin ren shan lin, guo zhi bao y*/亲仁善邻，国之宝也 (it is highly valuable for a country to be close with and benevolent to its neighbours)” and “*zjiuzai xulin, dao y*/救灾恤邻，道也 (providing disaster relief and helping one’s neighbours is virtuous) ”.

Though reciprocity and helping one’s neighbour are cross-cultural values, such values are phrased by Chinese NGOs via passages from traditional Chinese texts: “*Dishui Zhi En, Dang Yongquan Xiangbao* /滴水之恩，当涌泉相报 (I received drops of water when in need; I shall return the kindness with a spring) ” and “*Xiangzhi Wu Yuanjin, Wanli Shang Weilin*/相知无远近，万里尚为邻 (Mutual understanding disregards distance; neighbors can live even thousands of miles apart) ”. In such way, Chinese NGOs could better correspond to the custom of their Chinese audience. These traditional phrases are also frequently used by Chinese leaders or diplomatic officials in public speeches, as they are a major discursive source for Chinese-ness and China’s soft power (Cheung, 2012). For example, “*Xiangzhi Wu Yuanjin, Wanli Shang Weilin*/相知无远近，万里尚为邻” was cited by President Xi in a diplomatic speech given in Peru in 2016 (Xi, 2016), and “*Dishui Zhi En, Dang Yongquan Xiangbao* /滴水之恩，当涌泉相报” was quoted by Chinese spokesperson Zhao Lijian in a press conference about the situation of COVID-19 pandemic (People.cn, 2020). By using these traditional Chinese terms, Chinese NGOs do not only legitimize themselves through moralization, but also through authorization by the Chinese state.

## **6.6 Discussion**

### ***Charity or Diplomacy?***

There are a variety of ways showing that Chinese NGOs diplomatise their international projects, though the degree and goals of diplomatisation may differ sharply between NGOs. For NGOs with clear diplomatic intentions, identifying the promotion of international cooperation and friendship are major goals. Such NGOs are usually GONGOs founded by governmental bodies for the purposes of international exchange and public diplomacy. China Foundation for Peace and Development, for example, was founded for the purpose of “to promote peaceful

development and common prosperity of the world” (CFPD, n.d.). For this group of Chinese NGOs, the core purpose of international charity projects, no matter their form – be it a school donation project or a free eye surgery program – is to show China’s benevolence in the function of public diplomacy. As diplomacy dominates charity, these Chinese NGOs are characterised as “diplomacy with charity”.

Both explicit and implicit diplomatic discourses are often used simultaneously by these NGOs. However, some Chinese NGOs are not directly initiated by the government for diplomatic purposes and do not explicitly express their diplomatic intentions; instead, their role and connection are implicitly expressed primarily through cultural promotion and national recognition in the program testimonies. I name such a group as “charity with diplomacy” to indicate that diplomacy is only implicitly attached to their primary role as cross-border charities. Many non-GONGOs are in this category, and unlike NGOs in the “diplomacy with charity” category, they do not employ explicit official diplomatic discourses like “BRI” or “promote China’s foreign relations” in their presentations. Rainbow Volunteer Club is a good example of this category; it has no governmental background and does not cite “BRI” or other official diplomatic terms in any of its public presentations. However, its diplomatic intention can still be observed through implicit messages and Chinese culture promotion (see Figure 8-9). There are also situations between “diplomacy with charity” and “charity with diplomacy” where it is hard to tell whether the diplomatic intention dominates. The CFPA is a good example. The CFPA is a GONGO, which frequently uses “BRI” and other official terms as part of their motivation in public statements, invites Chinese officials to attend project launch ceremony, and adopts multiple Chinese elements in their program designs. However, its internationalisation was initiated by its own leadership instead by governmental mandate. Most of its international projects are not government-funded. Over a decade, largely by itself, it has developed a wide variety of projects (e.g. on education, sanitation, healthcare) with a diverse range of funders (e.g. corporations, public, international organizations, governments) in multiple countries in Asia and Africa. It would be reckless to conclude that diplomatic incentive dominates its internationalisation when such self-driven commitments exist. In the case of CFPA and some other Chinese NGOs, their charitable contribution to society co-exists with symbolic diplomatic gestures and it is hard to distinguish which one dominates.

### ***Strategic or Genuine Diplomatisation?***

The discursive legitimisation strategies discussed above are analysis at the discursive level instead of organizational level. The way discourses are constructed can tell what the writer/NGO considers as legitimate, regardless of the writer/NGO intentionally writing it or unconsciously writing it for legitimisation. A writer/NGO may not write something in mind that this sentence is to gain legitimacy, however what the writer constructs can result in showing legitimacy. Thus, although diplomatic discourses can legitimise international projects, they may not be constructed intentionally. However, a lot of evidence does show that Chinese NGOs do use diplomatic discourses, especially those explicit diplomatic discourses, strategically to gain legitimacy from Chinese stakeholders. For example, the CFPA has listed its Smiling Children, a project delivering free food to children in Ethiopia, on both the Chinese online fundraising platform Tencent Charity, which mediates in Chinese and targets a Chinese audience, and the global online fundraising platform Global Giving, which mediates in English and targets a Western audience. Its Chinese fundraising advertisements emphasise the role of NGOs in supporting China (CFPA, 2021a) while avoiding China-related discourses in its

global fundraising advertisements (CFPA, n.d.b). Instead, the concept of sustainable development goals is stressed, which is prevalent in global development discourses and widely recognised by the global community. Another example illustrates how diplomatisation can be a deliberate ploy for legitimacy, especially to donors. One project of Yundi (Yundi Behavior and Health Research Center), a Yunnan-based NGO focusing on supporting marginalized community, was to help children in the Ma Ja Yang refugee camp in Myanmar from February 2017 to January 2018. It was funded by the Department of Commerce of Yunnan Province. After Yundi completed the project, it successfully applied for funding from the New Zealand Embassy to China for a similar project in the same area, though the project changed from providing education to providing sanitation facilities. Through discourses such as “to contribute to long-term friendship and peace between China and Myanmar (利于中缅长期友好和平)” and “to implement the Belt and Road through specific activities (通过具体活动落实一带一路)”, the intention of promoting China-Myanmar relations is evident in the project funded by the Department of Commerce (Yundi, 2017b). Yet, no mention is made of China-Myanmar relations in the project review of the project funded by the New Zealand Embassy; Yundi positions itself as more of a professional organisation that provides charitable services and has a global vision rather than as a friendship ambassador to Myanmar (Yundi, 2018b). Both examples show that diplomatisation is an intentional strategy to convey legitimacy in front of Chinese donors and stakeholders. Such strategic use of official diplomatic discourses has also been confirmed by several interviews that mention they will use “BRI” only to domestic stakeholders as shown in the “Strategies of Chinese NGOs” section in Chapter 4.

However, within some NGOs, especially in those classed as “charity with diplomacy” with less explicit diplomatised representation, the possibility that they play the diplomatic role unintentionally to gain legitimacy can not be fully excluded. They may simply be driven by strong national identification, which can an important factor in the formation of organisational identity (e.g. Jack and Lorbiecki, 2007). Their diplomatisation, based on strong national identification, is concerned with a “state of mind which gives ‘national’ messages, memories and images a preferred status in social communication and a greater weight in the making of decisions” (Alter 1994, as cited in Lu 2020, p13). Such a state of mind is ubiquitous in the organisational introductions, newsletters, and project reports of Chinese NGOs, which introduce themselves as the “first”, “biggest”, or “only” Chinese NGOs that have done certain things. For NGOs whose founders have significance influence over the operations of the NGOs, the strong national identity of an organisation can be an extension of their leaders’ nationalistic sentiments. In a meeting, the director of an independent Chinese NGO described one of the challenges that Chinese NGOs face with internationalisation is the lack of capable human resources: “(the requirements for such international position are high) because once you go international, you become a diplomat”, adding that it was difficult to find talent who can run a project and are a competent diplomat (Conference 24). This NGO has implicitly promoted China’s image in the press releases of its wildlife preservation project. The intention to promote China’s image seems more genuine as it springs from the director’s own patriotism and the strong national identity of the organisation, rather being a strategy to please Chinese authorities as the NGO has strategically avoided government funding to remain more autonomous (Interview 17). In addition, such genuine diplomatisation is reflected in the words of the leader of the NGO.

*“I wish to establish something like MSF, a true international NGO. However, it must be built by Chinese...Chinese should take international responsibilities. One initial motivation of internationalisation is to improve the image of China, but I dislike making it as a Chinese political symbol” (Interview 17)*

In all, multiple evidence has shown that the use of explicit diplomatic discourses, which half of the NGOs under study has used, is the strategy of Chinese NGOs to gain legitimacy, while the true motivation behind implicit diplomatisation can be more complex.

### ***The Implicit Influence of Chinese State***

The state’s influence is clearly shown behind Chinese NGOs’ tendencies of depoliticisation and diplomatisation through the discursive legitimisation process. Evident in the “avoidance” strategy, Chinese NGOs avoid using discourses that are critical and sensitive which might result in de-legitimizing themselves in front of the state. The “authorization” strategies have directly shown that the Chinese state has influenced the discourses of Chinese NGOs by being a major source for legitimacy. Using official discourses, exemplifying the state’s action and showing recognition from the state discursively have become major means for Chinese NGOs to achieve legitimacy. The state’s influence through “rationalization” and “moralization” discursive strategies are also evident, though in a more nebulous way. The nationalist ideologies underpinning some of the diplomatic discourses and moral values used to justify international aid activities, such as reciprocity and “helping your neighbor”, are not solely determined by the Chinese state given these values are often shaped by complex historical, cultural and political processes. However, the Chinese state plays a key role in defining the space for nationalist ideologies and shaping moral values that are acceptable in society. Particularly, Chinese NGOs sometimes justify their international aid activities by using values at the state level that states should show reciprocity and states should help their neighbors. Such state-level discursive construction is consistent with the values that are endorsed by the Chinese state and with the way how the Chinese state shows these values, evident in the use of terms like e.g. “*Dishui Zhi En, Dang Yongquan Xiangbao/滴水之恩，当涌泉相报*” and “*Xiangzhi Wu Yuanjin, Wanli Shang Weilin/相知无远近，万里尚为邻*”. Thus, though it is not possible to conclude that the state is the only source of influence over these values shown behind the diplomatisation of Chinese NGOs, it shows that state is an important source over such values. Chinese NGOs have exhibited strong consistency with the Chinese state in the values that contribute to legitimacy in society and the Chinese state has exerted influence, either directly or subtly, over the Chinese NGOs’ choice of discourses to represent those values. By using the state-endorsed discourses, Chinese NGOs have reproduced the state discourses and risked themselves to become agents of state propaganda.

Northern NGOs are often criticised for being “too close to donors” that they lose their independence from large donor states and multinational organisations and are unable to provide development solutions that are different from the mainstream apparatus (e.g. Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Banks et al. 2015). Unlike Western donor states, the Chinese state is no large donor to NGOs. The link between the Chinese state and Chinese NGOs in their internationalisation is not straightforward through material resources, rather the link is that Chinese state is a major source for legitimacy and for shaping what is legitimate or not in society. The major donors of Chinese NGOs for their international projects, primarily being Chinese corporations, organisations and individuals, are also influenced by values endorsed by the state. Chinese NGOs avoid any risk of delegitimizing themselves by discursive depoliticisation and gain legitimacy in the eyes of Chinese society by diplomatisation. By more or less diplomatising their international projects, Chinese NGOs have strategic tendencies that

go beyond providing mere international charity. Chinese NGOs are more of a complement than an alternative to the state-led Chinese development cooperation in terms of their function of promoting soft power, which is at least evident to their Chinese audience.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

This study aims at examining how Chinese NGOs “think” in their internationalisation and their motivations behind it. By leveraging qualitative content analysis and the discursive legitimation framework developed by Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), the study finds that Chinese NGOs only use soft charity discourses instead of critical discourses that avoid politicizing any development problems and use discourses that explicitly or/and implicitly diplomatise their international charity. These discourses help Chinese NGOs achieve legitimacy and avoid de-legitimacy through four discursive legitimation strategies: avoidance, authority, rationalization and moralization. Even though the Chinese state does not intervene much with Chinese NGOs in their international projects materially as shown in the previous chapters, the Chinese state exerts its influence implicitly through shaping the sources of legitimacy and value for internationalisation. In such way, Chinese NGOs do not develop a critical and independent discourse from the Chinese state. They tend to use discourses and representation that are aligned with the “People-to-People Bond” positioning held by the Chinese state on NGOs. Such tendency does not only apply to GONGOs, which tend to use both explicit and implicit diplomatic discourses but also non-GONGOs, which tend to use more implicit ones. Chinese NGOs complement the current Chinese overseas development landscape by promoting China’s soft power, at least in front of a Chinese audience. The Chinese state does not need to explicitly require Chinese NGOs to promote soft power, but they already do so by themselves, intentionally or unintentionally. The study has one major limitation: it does not sufficiently reflect the local perspectives of the host countries. Most Chinese NGOs’ publications are in Chinese and target Chinese readers, so further research is needed concerning how Chinese NGOs represent themselves to locals, which may require an ethnographic approach. In the current study, Chinese symbols displayed on goods donated to locals and Chinese national flags displayed onsite indicate that at least on some occasions, Chinese NGOs do send strong diplomatic messages to locals, though how exactly they communicate with locals, how they differ their communication between local officials and local communities, requires further research. Moreover, as shown in the analysis nationalist sentiments are strong in Chinese NGOs, further study is required to study how nationalism and patriotism affects Chinese NGOs in their decisions for internationalisation.